THE LARGER SOCIETY

Notes on the Welfare State

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1. *The Abstract Model*

Ferment, conflict, innovation, violence, a measure of madness—all these and more characterize the American scene in the late sixties. The image of social stability, which dominated both liberal and conservative thought only a few years ago, has proved to be an illusion. The welfare state in which we live is strained by tension and clash. But before examining these, let's look at the welfare state as an idea or model in order to gain some historical perspective. A model is not a picture, either still or moving; it lacks, and in order to serve its purpose it must lack, the dynamics of reality. It may articulate skeletal structures but it cannot describe either the processes of change or idiosyncratic traits.

Among current models of contemporary society the most
useful, I think, is that of the welfare state. By the welfare state one signifies a capitalist economy in which the interplay of private and/or corporate owners in a largely regulated market remains dominant but in which the workings of the economy are so modified that the powers of free disposal by property owners are controlled politically.

The welfare state is constantly being reconstructed. The model we advance for it may suggest an equilibrium, but in the actuality from which the model is drawn there persist serious difficulties, conflicts, and breakdowns. If the welfare state could reach, so to say, a point of internal perfection, the point at which it would all but approach its "ideal type," it would comprise a system of regulated conflicts making for pluralist balance and stability. But this point of perfection cannot be reached, if only because the welfare state appears within a given historical context, so that it must always be complicated by the accumulation of problems provided by a capitalist economy and a specific national past; complicated, further, by concurrent international conflicts which, as we now see, can crucially affect and distort its formation; and complicated, as well, by a series of pressures, ranging from status ambition to moral idealism, which it is not, as a society, well equipped to handle.

Within certain limits having to do with basic relations of power and production, the welfare state remains open to varying sociopolitical contents, since it is itself the visible evidence of a long and continuing struggle among classes and groups for greater shares in the social product. That the welfare state exists at all is due not merely to autonomous processes within the economy, or enlightened self-interest on the part of dominant classes, or moral idealism, as over decades it has stirred segments of the population into conscience; no, the welfare state is importantly the result of social struggle on the part of the labor movement. If the working class has not fulfilled the "historic tasks" assigned to it by Marxism and if it shows,
at least in the advanced industrial countries, no sign of revolu-
tionary initiative, it has nevertheless significantly modified the
nature and softened the cruelties of capitalist society.

In a curious way—the analogy need not be stressed—the
welfare state has served a function similar to that of Com-
munism in the East. I do not mean to suggest an equivalence
in value, since for myself, as a socialist, there can be no ques-
tion that it is immensely more desirable to live in a society
that allows political freedom and thereby organized struggle
and independent class action. Yet, from a certain long-range
perspective, one could say that both the welfare state and the
Communist societies have had the effect of raising the histori-
cal expectations of millions of people, even while offering
radically different kinds of satisfaction and sharing in common
failures. Both have enabled previously mute segments of society
to feel that the state ought to act in their behalf and that per-
haps they have a role in history as active subjects demanding
that the state serve their needs. The contrast with earlier
societies is striking, for in them, as Michael Walzer writes, the
dominant conviction was that

... the state always is more than it does. Pre-welfare theorists de-
scribed it as a closely knit body, dense and opaque, whose members
were involved emotionally as well as materially, mysteriously as well
as rationally, in the fate of the whole. The members ought to be in-
volved, it was said, not for the sake of concrete benefits of any sort,
but simply, for the sake of communion. Since loyalty was a gift for
which there was to be no necessary return, it could not be predicated
on anything so clear-cut as interest. It depended instead on all sorts
of ideological and ceremonial mystification. ... The state still does
depend on ideology and mystery, but to a far less degree than ever
before. It has been the great triumph of liberal theorists and pol-
icians to undermine every sort of political divinity, to shatter all
the forms of ritual obfuscation, and to turn the mysterious oath into
a rational contract. The state itself they have made over ... into a
machine, the instrument of its citizens (rather than their mythical
common life) devoted to what Bentham called "welfare production." It is judged, as it ought to be, by the amounts of welfare it produces and by the justice and efficiency of its distributive system.

What occurs characteristically during the growth of the welfare state is a series of "invasions," by previously neglected or newly cohered social groups demanding for themselves a more equitable portion of the social product and appealing to the common ideology of welfarism as the rationale for their demands. (Again an analogy with Communism: the dominant ideology is exploited and violated by the ruling elite, yet can be turned against its interests.)

In its early stages, the welfare state is "invaded" mostly by interest groups—economic, racial, ethnic—which seek both improvements in their condition and recognition of their status. An interest claim that is made through norms the entire society says it accepts is harder to reject than one which sets up new norms not yet enshrined in the society's formal value system—and that, in passing, is one reason it is today easier to press for desirable domestic legislation than to affect foreign policy. In its later stages—which I believe we are just beginning to approach in the United States—the welfare state is subjected to a series of pressures that morally are both more grandiose and more trivial than those of the usual interest groups; since now it becomes possible for claims to be entered with—and against—the welfare state by those who yearn forward to what they hope will be a splendid future and those who yearn backward to what they imagine was a golden past.

This course of "invasions" is by no means completed in the United States and indeed is scandalously frustrated by racial and social meanness. As long, however, as there are groups trying to break in and powers trying to keep them out, we can be certain that the welfare state will be marked by severe conflict, even though the "invading" groups may differ from decade to decade. Nor is there any certainty whatever that the welfare
state will prove receptive to all the claims likely to be made by groups largely outside its system of dispensation. It is possible that the legitimate demands of the Negroes will not be met and that this would, in turn, lead to the virtual destruction of the welfare state as we know it; but if that were to occur it would not, I believe, be the result of an inherent dynamic or ineluctable necessity within the welfare state as a socio-economic system, but rather it would be the result of a tradition of racism so deeply ingrained in American life that it threatens to survive, and overwhelm, any form of society.

This process of "invasion" is one that a good many of the younger American radicals find troublesome and concerning which I find a good many of them confused. Except for a few who have developed a snobbish contempt for the working class, they recognize the justice of the claims made by deprived groups trying to gain a larger share of power, goods, and recognition; but they fear that once this happens there must follow among the once-insurgent groups an adaptation to detested values and a complacent lapse into material comfort. In part, the young radicals are right. At a particular moment, a once-insurgent group may settle for what seems too little—though we ought to be suspicious of contemptuous judgments made by people who have not shared in past struggles or have merely grown up to enjoy their rewards. At a particular moment, a once-insurgent group may move from the drama of popular struggle to the politics of limited pressure. Right now, for example, the trade unions seem relatively quiescent; having won major victories, they may for a time content themselves with minor adjustments; but with time they are likely to raise their horizons of possibility and again come into conflict with the existing order; and in any case, it takes a peculiarly sectarian mentality not to see the tremendous potentialities of the recent UAW demand for something approaching a guaranteed annual wage for blue-collar workers.

Simply to stop at the point where formerly rebellious groups
are "absorbed" into society is to miss the point. For what the young radicals fail sufficiently to see is that when a major social group breaks into the welfare society, then—even though full justice is by no means done—the society nevertheless undergoes an important betterment. The United States after the "absorption" of the labor movement is a different and, on the whole, better society than it was before. By a certain judgment the unions have succumbed to the system, though we should remember that only rarely had they claimed to be its intransigent opponents. Yet even in their relative quiescence of the last few decades, the unions have performed an extremely valuable function: they have maintained a steady pressure, more than any other institution, in behalf of domestic social legislation which benefits not only their own members but a much wider segment of the population.

If—it is a large if—the Negroes succeed in establishing themselves within the society to the extent that the labor unions have, there will occur changes which can only be described as major and perhaps revolutionary—though there will not have occurred that "revolution" which various kinds of ideologues hope the Negroes will enact for them. Were such victories to be won by the Negroes, there would probably follow a certain relaxation among them, a settling-down to enjoy the fruits of struggle, such as occurred earlier among trade unionists. But if past experience is any guide, there would follow after a certain interval a new rise in social appetites among the once-insurgent group, so that it would continue to affect the shape of society even if no longer through exclusively insurgent methods.

Is there, however, a built-in limit to this process of "invasion"? Almost certainly, yes; and by habit one would say the point where fundamental relations of power seem threatened. But we are nowhere near that point; a large array of struggles await us before reaching it, and we cannot even be sure, certainly not as sure as we were a few decades ago, that this point
can be located precisely. The history of the Left in the twentieth century is marked by a series of dogmatic assertions as to what could not be done short of revolutionary upheaval; the actuality of history has consisted of changes won through struggle and human will which have in fact achieved some of the goals that were supposed to be unattainable short of apocalypse.

II. Some Other Models

The model of the welfare state I have been using here is of course an extrapolation from the complexities of history, and even if we are to content ourselves with it we must acknowledge the presence in our society of elements it cannot account for and which, indeed, conflict with it. Even the traditional laissez-faire model of capitalism, which by common consent is now obsolete, retains some importance. There are aspects of the society—certain segments of the economy, certain sectors of the country, certain strands of our ideological folklore—in regard to which the traditional model of capitalism retains much relevance, so that in discussing the welfare state, or welfare capitalism, one must bear in mind the earlier historical form out of which it emerged. More immediately, however, there are several models which should be looked at, not merely or even so much as competitors but rather as supplements, necessary complications, to the welfare state model.

The Garrison State. The war economy is like a parallel structure, a double aorta, of the welfare state, at some points reinforcing it through an economic largesse which a reactionary Congress might not otherwise be willing to allow, and at other points crippling it through sociopolitical aggrandizement such as we can observe at this very moment. In consequence, we can never be free of the haunting possibility that if our military expenditure were radically cut there
would follow a collapse or a very severe crisis in the welfare state. Nor can we be sure that gradually the military arrangement will not overwhelm and consume welfare. But these, I would stress, are matters of political decision and thereby of social struggle; they will be settled not through some mysterious economic automatism but through the encounter of opposing classes and groups.

*The Mass Society.* This theory proposes a model of society in which traditional class antagonisms and distinctions have become blurred and in which there occurs a steady drift toward a bureaucratic, non-terrorist and prosperous authoritarianism, with a population grown passive and atomized, "primary" social groups disintegrated, and traditional loyalties and associations become lax. Herbert Marcuse writes: "Those social groups which dialectical theory identified as forces of negation are either defeated or reconciled within the established system." In simpler language this means that the working class which Marxism assigned to revolutionary leadership seems either unwilling or incapable of fulfilling the assignment. That there is a tendency in modern society toward a slack contentment it would be foolish to deny. But I think it sentimental to slide from an abandonment of traditional Marxist expectations to a vision of historical stasis in which men are fated to be the zombies of bureaucratic organization, zombies stuffed with calories, comfort, and contentment; or to slide from the conclusion that revolutionary expectations no longer hold in the West to a Spenglerian gloom in which we must yield the idea of major social change and indulge ourselves in compensatory fantasies about the last "pure" revolution of the third world.

More fundamentally, the trouble with the "mass society" theory is that, if pushed hard enough, it posits a virtual blockage of history. Yet the one thing that history, including the history of the last several decades, teaches us is that, for good or bad, such an eventuality seems most unlikely. Even in
what seems to some disenchanted intellectuals the murk of stability, change is ceaseless. Twenty years ago who would have supposed that Russia and China would be at each other's throats, or that the seeming monolith of Communism would disintegrate? That a conservative French general would succeed in ending a colonial war in Algeria after both the liberal and radical parties failed? That in the United States Catholic students would be picketing Cardinal Spellman's residence? That a silent generation would appear, to be followed by a remarkably articulate one, which in turn . . . well, who knows? What looks at a given moment like the end of days turns out to be a mere vestibule to novelty.

One interesting offshoot of the mass-society theory, popular in some academic and student circles, declares that in a society where revolution is impossible and reform ineffectual, the only remaining strategy of protest is a series of dramatic raids from the social margin, akin to the guerrilla movements of Latin America. Insofar as this strategy draws upon the American tradition of individual moral protest, it has a decided respectability if only, I think, a limited usefulness. Insofar as it is meant to satisfy an unearned nostalgia, it is utterly feckless. Raising hell is a fine American habit, and if hell is even approximately identified, a useful one. But in contemporary society there is always the danger that the desperado exhausts himself much sooner than he discomfits society, and then retires at the ripe age of 30½ muttering about the sloth of the masses. Or he may be crushed in the embrace of a society always on the lookout for interesting spectacles.

A far more serious and honorable version of this strategy is that of absolute moral conscience, for example, that of the young people who, while not religious, refuse the Vietnam war on moral grounds. Their protest is to be respected. If they are simply bearing witness, then nothing more need be said. If, however, it is claimed that they stir other, more conventional and sluggish segments of the mass society into
response, then we have abandoned the ground of moral absolutes and moved to the slippery terrain of effectiveness and expediency—and then what they do must be scrutinized as a political tactic, open to the problem of consequences both expected and unexpected.

*Liberal Pluralism.* This theory, associated with the name of Daniel Bell, sees the society as a pluralist system in which competing pressure groups—some reflecting socioeconomic interests and others refracting the aspirations of status groups—tacitly agree to abide by the “rules of the game” and to submit their rival claims to the jurisdiction of technical experts. Superficially, this approach is congruent with the one I have here outlined, insofar as it traces the effects of political clash within a given society; fundamentally, it is divergent from the approach I have taken, insofar as it accepts the society as a given and fails to penetrate beneath political maneuver to the deeper contradictions of social interest. Still, whether we like it or not, this theory helps describe a good part of what has been happening in the United States these last few decades, especially when one confines oneself to the local texture of political life. I think, however, it is a theory inadequate on several counts:

It fails to consider sufficiently that within the society there remain long-range economic and technological trends threatening the stability, perhaps the survival, of the pluralist system: that is, it asserts a state of equilibrium too readily.

It fails to recognize sufficiently that even when the society is operating at a high degree of efficiency and what passes for a notable benevolence, it does not satisfy human needs and instead gives rise to new kinds of trouble with which it is poorly equipped to deal.

It fails to acknowledge sufficiently that the very “rules of the game” are prearranged so as to favor inequities of power and wealth.
III. Some Complications of Reality

The welfare state does not appear in a vacuum; it arises at a certain point in the development of capitalist society and must therefore confront the accumulated tradition and peculiarities of that society. In Britain it comes to a society where serious problems remain of a pre-modern and pre-democratic kind, difficulties having to do with aristocracy and status. In France it comes to a society where the necessary industrialization has just been completed. In Sweden it comes to a society with a minimum of historical impediments or world political entanglements and therefore functions best of all—though here, as Gunnar Myrdal describes it, the welfare state tends to break down organs of rural and village self-government. In the United States it comes at a time of severe historical and moral tensions: the former concerning our role as a world power and the latter a long-term shift in the country’s pattern of values. Let us glance at the second.

For some decades now there has been noticeable in this country a slow disintegration of those binding assumptions which, operating almost invisibly, hold a society together and provide its moral discipline. These values can hardly be evoked in a phrase but we can at least point to a few: a creed of individualist self-reliance linked with a belief that the resultant of unrestrained struggle among private persons (atomized economic units) will prove to be to the common good; a conviction that the claims of conscience, seriously entertained, and the promptings of will, persistently accepted, are in fact equivalent; a belief in work as salvation and therapy; a steady devotion to privacy, rigor, control, and moral sobriety. In short, the whole American mythos which we have inherited from the nineteenth century and which in retrospect has been remarkably successful in unifying the country.

During the last few decades, however, this creed has proven inadequate to the American reality, with the evidence ranging
from the crisis of urbanization to the gradual decay of religious belief. Perhaps the most striking evidence has been the way in which the WASP elite has slowly been losing its hegemony in American society. So far as I can tell, this loss of hegemony, accompanied by a decline in self-confidence, has occurred more on the social surface than at the economic base, but with time it is bound also to affect the latter.

The American creed served to unify a nation that in its earlier years had largely consisted of a loose compact of regions. Once these regions were gradually melted into a nation, the unifying ideology began to lose some of its power and the sociocultural elite articulating the ideology began to decline. Precisely the unification of the country through the cement of this ideology gave an opportunity for new interest groups and competing moral styles to press their claims.

This process could not, of course, act itself out autonomously. It was always intertwined with social struggles. And as it slowly unfolded itself at the center of society there occurred crisis reactions at the extremes: on the right, a heartfelt cry that morality is being destroyed, religion mocked, our way of life abandoned; on the left, an impatience to be done with old ways and to plunge joyously, sometimes merely programmatically, into experiment. The earnest suburban middle class which only a few years ago was shaking with indignation at the collapse of standards, and the hippies of Haight-Ashbury and East Village—these form symmetrical polarities along the spectrum of American moral life, each reacting to the gradual decay of American convictions and neither absorbed by the kind of pluralistic moderation and maneuvering encouraged by the welfare state. Both the little old lady in tennis shoes and the young hippie in sandals are demonstrating their hostility to the “role playing” of the current scene. Both provide complications of response which our increasingly rationalized and rationalistic society finds it hard to handle. For in a sense, the kind of issues raised by Barry Goldwater
and the SDS are symmetrical in concern, if sharply different in moral value. Both of these metapolitical tendencies are reacting to long-range historical and cultural developments at least as much as to immediate political issues.

What then are the political consequences of this gradual deterioration of the American value system?

The traditional elite can no longer assert itself with its former powers and self-assurance. One reason Adlai Stevenson roused such positive reactions among intellectuals was that it seemed to them that he was a figure in the old style, for which, in their conservative disenchantment, they had developed a sudden fondness.

The image of America inherited from folklore, textbooks, and civic rhetoric proves unusable, and the result is an enormous barrier of intellectual and emotional fog which prevents people from apprehending their true needs.

At the margins of the welfare state there spring up apocalyptic movements and moods, seemingly political but often in their deepest impulses anti-political (they want not a change in power relations but an end of days). Reflecting the pressures of the fading past and the undiscovered future, these movements confound, yet sometimes also refresh, the politics of the welfare state.

IV. Inner Problems of the Welfare State

It is not only the distinctive American setting which affects our version of the welfare state; there are also certain characteristics which seem to be intrinsically dysfunctional or at least unattractive. A few of them:

Especially in America, the welfare state fails to live up to its formal claims. At best it is a semi-welfare state; at worst an anti-welfare state. It allows a significant minority, the chronic poor, to be dumped beneath the social structure, as a lumpen deposit of degradation and pathology.
The welfare state may gratify the interests of previously deprived minorities and thereby benefit the society as a whole; but while doing this, and perhaps because of it, the welfare state tends to dampen concern with such larger values as justice, fraternity, equality, and community. At least for a time, one consequence is that fundamental issues of power are muted; for better or worse—I think for worse—the system as such is hardly an issue in public debate.

Yet here again we ought to beware of a sin prevalent among intellectuals: the sin of impatience with history. For even in its brief existence, and with its own "historical tasks" far from fulfilled, the welfare state has witnessed the growth of an enormous body of social criticism, as well as the appearance of the militantly idealistic young, both of which insist that we pay attention to precisely the larger issues. If the welfare state lulls some groups into acquiescence, it also grants a succeeding generation the relative affluence to experiment with its life-styles and cry out against the slumbers of their elders. The crucial question, to which no answer can yet be given, is whether this concern will remain limited to a tiny segment of the population, driven wild with frustrated reachings toward transcendence.

In its own right, the welfare state does not arouse strong loyalties. It seems easier, if no more intelligent, to die for King and Country, or the Stars and Stripes, or the Proletarian Fatherland than for Unemployment Insurance and Social Security. The welfare state makes for a fragmentation of publics and, at a certain point, a decline in political participation. By one of those accursed paradoxes history keeps throwing up, the welfare state seems to undercut the vitality of the democratic process even while strengthening both its formal arrangements and its socioeconomic base.

But again a word of caution. It should not be assumed that in a country like the United States, despite the rise of group interest politics and the atomization of social life, the tradi-
tional claims of the nation no longer operate. For they do, even if in a muted and more quizzical way. Millions of people still respond to the call of patriotism and the rhetoric of democracy, even in their corniest versions. The centrifugal tendencies set into motion by the welfare state must always, therefore, be seen against a background of historical traditions and national sentiments which lie deeply imbedded in collective life.

The welfare state cannot, within the limits of the nation-state, cope with the growing number of socioeconomic problems that are soluble only on an international level or do not really fit into the received categories of class or group conflict. As Richard Titmuss says:

It is much harder today to identify the causal agents of change—the microbes of social disorganization and the virtues of impoverishment—and to make them responsible for the costs of "disservices." Who should bear the social costs of the thalidomide babies, of urban blight, of smoke pollution, of the obsolescence of skills, of automation, of the impact on the peasants of Brazil of synthetic coffee which will dispense with the need for coffee beans?

The welfare state provides no clear or necessary outlook concerning the role of the nation in the modern world. It is almost compatible with any foreign policy, despite our too-easy assumption that domestic liberalism is likely to go together with restraint in foreign policy. The welfare state can be yoked to a foreign policy which saves Titoist Yugoslavia and destroys Vietnam, which provides food to India and shores up dictators elsewhere in Asia, which proclaims and begins the Alliance for Progress and sanctions the Dominican intervention. The consequences are severe dislocations within the welfare state, splits between groups oriented primarily toward the improvement of their own conditions and groups oriented primarily toward improving the place our society occupies within the world. Of this, more later.
Within its terms and limits the welfare state finds it very difficult to provide avenues of fulfillment for many of the people whose conditions it has helped to improve—the workers displaced by automation, the Negroes given the vote but little else, the young seeking work that makes sense. That is why there now appear new formations, such as the subculture of the alienated young, responding primarily to their felt sense of the falseness of things. If the revolt of the radical right was, in Richard Hofstadter's phrase, an outburst of status politics—the anxious need of an insecure segment to assert itself in the prestige hierarchy—then the revolt of the alienated young is, among other things, an anti-status outburst—a wish to break loose from the terms of categorization fixed by the society. That, in the course of this effort, the young sometimes settle into categories, styles, and mannerisms quite as rigid as those against which they rebel, is something else again.

v. Politics of the Welfare State

The politics of the welfare state extends back into the early twentieth century, through a variety of parallel and competing traditions—the labor movement, the Socialist movement, the various liberal groups, the moral pressures exerted through Christian action, the increasing role of the Jews as a liberal force. But for our present purposes we can date the beginning of welfare-state politics as a style of coalition to the early thirties and perhaps even more precisely to the election of 1932, one of the few in American history which marked a major realignment of political forces. In that election the unions began to play the powerful role they would command during the next few decades; large numbers of Negroes began their historic switch to the Democratic party; the city machines found it expedient to go along with Roosevelt's policies. And soon significant numbers of intellectuals would begin their entry into practical politics. This coalition would remain a major
force in American life during the next three or so decades. When all or most of its component parts could be held together, formally or informally, and it could command the practical issues and/or moral appeals to win a good cut of the middle-class vote, this coalition could often win elections on a national scale and in many industrialized states. When there were group defections, victory went to the right. In general one can say that this coalition was most successful whenever it managed to link strong economic interests with moral urgencies, the politics of pressure with the traditions of American liberalism and populism. I believe that this lesson still holds, despite sharply changed circumstances.

What specific forms did this coalition take? It could be one or more of the following:

a bloc of organizations and movements cooperating for a legislative or electoral end;
a long-range concurrence in electoral behavior, so that certain expectations could reasonably be inferred—e.g., that even if we do not have self-conscious classes or disciplined publics there are at least certain fundamental recognitions of common interest;
intermittent activization of class and interest groups when aroused by specific issues—e.g., “right to work” laws, Negro rights, etc;
various electoral and political arrangements within and across the political parties.

Now one way of looking upon recent American politics is to conclude that in recent years the liberal-left coalition has gradually disintegrated and, with the Vietnam war, seems virtually to have come to an end.

There are plenty of signs. The electoral blocs seem to function with less assurance and predictability than ten or twenty years ago. Workers reaching a measure of affluence are less
likely to follow the signals of their union leadership; they may veer off into middle-class styles or lapse into racialism. Still, when certain issues are clearly drawn along class lines, as for example during the last presidential election or the earlier struggles around "right to work" laws, the labor vote can still cohere into a major force.

Similar signs of change seem to be occurring among the Negroes, where the massive commitment to the Democratic party may—though it certainly has not yet—come to an end. And among younger people there is a growing inclination to respond to politics as if group interest were somehow vulgar or even reprehensible and what mattered most were political "styles" and moral, or pseudomoral, appeals rising above socioeconomic concerns.

Why then has this coalition devoted to defending and extending the welfare state come to a condition of crisis? A few answers suggest themselves:

As the interest groups become increasingly absorbed into the welfare state, their combativeness decreases, at least for a time. They develop a stake in the status quo and become economically and psychologically resistant to new kinds of insurgency. Thus, while a general case can and should be made for a community of interests among the unions, the Negroes, and the unorganized poor, these groups will often clash both in their immediate demands and their basic political styles.

What I would call the "rate of involvement" among the interest groups and moral-issue groups is likely to be sharply different at various moments, and the result is unavoidable friction. When the unions were surging ahead in the thirties, they received little help from the churches; it did not even occur to anyone at that time to expect much help. The Catholic Church in particular was regarded as a major center of political reaction. Today we witness the astonishing and exhilarating rise of ferment within the Catholic community, while
the unions, though still fierce guardians of yesterday's gains, are not notable as centers of innovation.

Ideally there ought to be cooperation between those committed to a politics of pressure and those committed to a politics of insurgency; but in practice the latter often tend to define themselves through dissocation from the former (perhaps on the "principle" that you strike out most violently against your closest relatives) while the former feel their survival and even their honor to be threatened by the latter. As long as the wretched Vietnam war continues and social stagnation consequently characterizes our domestic life, this conflict is likely to be exacerbated.

The programmatic demands advanced by the liberal-left groups for domestic reforms during the thirties have by now either been mostly realized or require merely—but that's some merely!—quantitative implementation. By itself this does not yield a dramatic or inspiring perspective; it does not excite the young, it barely arouses those in whose behalf it is advanced, and it proves more and more inadequate for coping with the new problems we all experience more sharply than we can define.

There has occurred over the Vietnam war a split between groups focusing primarily on domestic issues, mostly the unions, and the groups focusing primarily on foreign policy, mostly the middle-class peace organizations and radical youth. During the twentieth century, with the possible exception of the 1916 election, foreign policy has never played a decisive role in American elections; or, to modify that a bit, disputes over foreign policy, such as the interventionist/isolationist quarrel in the thirties, did not threaten the survival of the liberal coalition. Today this is no longer true, and cannot be true—even though I am unhappily convinced that in an electoral showdown the moral protestants, among whom I wish to include myself, would prove to be a very small minority. Never in the past has it been possible to rally a successful
liberal-left movement on issues of foreign policy alone or predominantly. Whether it can be done today remains very much an open question.

We are living through an exhaustion, perhaps temporary, of American liberalism. It is not, at the moment, rich in programmatic suggestions. It has lost much of its earlier élan. It has become all too easily absorbed into establishment maneuvers, so that it shares a measure of responsibility for the Vietnam disasters and ghetto outbreaks. It has not developed new leaders. In short, as its most intelligent spokesmen know, it is in a state of moral and intellectual disarray.

Yet in fairness one should add that pretty much the same difficulties beset most or all other political tendencies in the United States. One of the remarkable facts about our political life is the paucity of specific proposals to come from the far left or far right. A comparison with the thirties is instructive, for whatever else was wrong with American radicalism (almost everything) at that time, it did advance specific proposals for legislation and thereby agitation. Today that is hardly the case. “Participatory democracy” may be a sentiment as noble as it is vague, but even its most ardent defenders cannot suppose it to be a focused proposal for our national life. And by a similar token, it is interesting that Governor Reagan did not really try to dismantle the welfare state against which he had mock-raged during his campaign.

I think that for the next period we shall have to live and work within the limits of the welfare state. There is only one possibility that this perspective will be invalidated, and that is a racial conflict pitting white against black—a tragedy which even the most puerile advocates of “nose-to-nose confrontation” must recognize as utterly disastrous. Unless we are to delude ourselves with the infantile leftistm of the talk about “Negro revolution” (sometimes invoked most fiercely by guerrillas with tenure), the first point on the political agenda must be a renewed struggle for the fulfillment of the claims
advanced by the welfare state. And that, in turn, means a simultaneous struggle to end the Vietnam war and to bring large-scale economic help to the Negro ghettos.

VI. A Word About the Future

If one could view the present moment with detachment, one might say that we are witnessing the breakdown of the old political coalition which helped usher in the welfare state and perhaps the slow beginnings of a new coalition to improve and transcend the welfare state. In this new coalition the labor movement would still have—it would have to have—a central role, but no longer with the decisive weight of the past. The churches would matter a great deal more, and so would the American "new class," that scattered array of intellectuals, academicians, and technicians. Issues of foreign policy would occupy a central place in the program of such a coalition, as would those concerning "quality of life"—though, I am convinced, the immediate major domestic concern remains the realization of the welfare-state expectations for the American Negroes. In such a coalition there might come together the tradition of moral protest and the bearing of witness with the tradition of disinterested service. All of this could occur only through a radicalization of American liberalism: a politics unqualifiedly devoted to democratic norms but much more militant, independent, and combative than the left-liberal world of today.

Whenever in the past American radicalism has flourished somewhat, it has largely been in consort with an upsurge of liberalism. There have been two major periods of radical activity: first during the years immediately preceding World War I and then during the thirties. The notion that radicalism can grow fat on the entrails of liberalism is a crude error, an absurdity.

But all of this remains hope and speculation. Before such
a new coalition emerges, if ever it does, there is likely to be severe tension and conflict among its hoped-for component parts. The Vietnam war stands as a harsh barrier, political and psychological, which must be broken down in order to take care of our business at home—which is by no means to accept the quietistic and reactionary argument that until the war is ended nothing can or should be done at home.

Even the full realization of the “idea” of the welfare state would not bring us to utopia or “the good society.” The traditional socialist criticisms in respect to the maldistribution of power, property, and income would still hold. But to continue the struggle for such a realization is both a political and human responsibility. And through the very struggle to realize the “idea” of the welfare state—if I may offer a “dialectical” observation—it is possible to gain the confidence, strength, and ideas through which to move beyond the welfare state. Unfortunately, American intellectuals do not seem well equipped for keeping to this dual perspective: they either lapse into a genteel and complacent conservatism or they veer off into an ultimatistic and pseudo-utopian leftism. Yet, when one comes to think of it, why should it be so difficult to preserve a balance between the struggle to force the present society to enact the reforms it claims to favor and the struggle to move beyond the limits of the given society? Tactically, to be sure, this creates frequent difficulties; but conceptually, as a guiding principle, I think it our only way.

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